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ABSTRACT

Based on field work in rural areas of Khuzestan Province in southwestern Iran in 1973-74, an examination of the nature of rural cultural houses in Iran was undertaken. Set up by royal decree in 1968, the rural cultural houses have had as their objective to assist peasantry in general and rural youth in particular to achieve a socially enriched life through development of athletic, artistic, and technical potentialities. In addition, activities attempted to foster community cooperation in solving socioeconomic problems and persuade peasants to participate in other community organizations. By 1977, some 1,030 villages had cultural houses, with guidance provided by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development and associations at provincial and village levels. An agent, usually a young woman, was generally assigned to each rural cultural house. At the time of field work, there were 69 such houses in Khuzestan, serving 1.8 percent of the province's population. In the three cultural houses visited (in addition to standard program activities), kindergartens were in operation, serving free breakfasts and hot lunches. Though extent of the cultural house program in Iran has been limited, these centers could be useful instruments for improving living conditions of the villagers, particularly if the work could be coordinated with that of other village services and organizations. (RS)

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RURAL CULTURAL HOUSES
(A NEW APPROACH TO RURAL YOUTH WORK IN IRAN)

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In Iran, as in many developing countries, there has been a wide gap between the standard of living of rural and urban population. To improve the life of rural inhabitants, the Government has, since the early fifties, introduced a number of socio-economic programmes. These concerned with the land reform, nationalization of water, developing the rural infra-structure, village councils, schools, rural co-operative societies, extension services, and more recently, house of equity, cultural houses and rural health insurance scheme. Furthermore, four corps have been formed to assist the staffing of some of these village-level services. These are Literacy Corps, Health Corps, Extension and Development Corps, Womens' Social Services Corps (the Female Educational Corps).

The purpose of this paper is to examine the nature of the rural cultural houses in Iran. This will be partly based on personal field work (1973-74) in several rural areas of Khuzestan Province in the south-western part of Iran.

1. The Objectives of Rural Cultural Houses

Prior to the 1960s, the Government's involvement in the provision of cultural and recreational facilities in rural areas was very limited. The Rural Boy Scout activities and the agicultural extension services rural youth programme, (carried out originally through its 4-D clubs), existed only in a few villages during the fifties.[1/] Even by 1968, the provision of cultural opportunities in rural areas was still low on the Government's list of rural development projects. "If, however, the

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1/ Cyrus Salmanzadeh, "Information on Rural Youth Work in Iran", a paper presented in the Fourth International Seminar on Methods and Programmes for the Promotion of Rural Youth Work, Herrsching Ulfer München, Federal Republic of Germany, June 17th to July 5th, 1968.

villages were to begin to approach the full-orbed social life emerging in the cities, attention had to be paid to providing cultural and recreational opportunities".[1] Thus, in order to expand such opportunities, a Royal Decree concerning the formation of a National Association of Rural Cultural Houses, with the Crown Prince as its honorary president, was issued in September 1968. This recent move to improve social life of the peasant (particularly rural youth) depends primarily on voluntary participation, while the Ministry of Co-operation and Rural Affairs (now the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development) [2] provides the necessary guidence and direction.

As stated in its constitution, the major objectives of the khaneh-e farhang-e rustaie, rural cultural houses, have been: firstly, to increase the peasants' general and social knowledge, by making them more aware of Iran's cultural heritage, and the principles of the White Revolution which was initiated in 1962; secondly, to encourage peasants to use their spare time more purposefully e.g. by learning the skill of non-farming commercial crafts (cottage crafts), reading useful books, magazines and newspapers; thirdly, to develop an individual's athletic, artistic and technical potentialities; fourthly, to foster the spirit of community co-operation in solving some of the socio-economic problems of the rural area; and, fifthly, to persuade peasant participation in other community organisations, e.g. the village council, co-cperative society, and farm corporation.[3]

1/ D. R. Denman, The King's Vista, Berkhamsted, UK: Geographical Publication Limited, 1973, p. 250.

2/ Since 1976 the Ministry of Co-operation and Rural Affairs has become a part of the Minisry of Agriculture and Rural Development.

3/ "Aiennameh-e Ageraie Khaneh-hie Farhang-e Rustaie" [Administrative Regulations Concerning the Rural Cultural Houses], (Tehran, Iran: The Organization for the Rural Cultural House, the Ministry of Land Reform and Rural Co-operative, 1347/1968), pp. 7-8.

2. The Organisation

The organisational chart for the implementation of the rural cultural houses programme at the national and provincial levels is shown in Figure 1, and the chart for the shahristan and village levels in Figure 2. The members of the National Association of the Rural Cultural Houses include six ministers and seven high ranking National Officials.[1]

At the provincial level, the Governor General, acting as the chairman of the Association, and the directors of several major official departments together with a few selected personalities from the private sector make up the Association. (In Khuzestan, in addition to the Governor General there are 12 other members, seven officials and five from the private sector).[2] Similarly, at the shahristan level, the Association is composed of the Governor (chairman), heads of a number of Government offices, and a few prominent local men.

At the village level, there is an 'executive council", and the Ministry of Co-operation and Rural Affairs' official agent. The executive council

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1/ The Association at the national or central level consists of the Ministers of: Court; Culture and Art; Development and Housing; Information; Land Reform and Rural Co-operative (now co-operation and Rural Affairs), and Education. Other seven high ranking national officials include the directors or chairmen of: the National Oil Company, the Plan Organization (now Plan and Budget Organization); National Committee for the World Anti-illiteracy Campaign; Imperial Society for Social Services; The Red Lion and Sun Society of Iran (Iran's Red Cross Organization); Physical Education and Recreation Organization; and Scout Organization of Iran a/

a/ Asasnameh-e Anjoman-e Melli Khaneh-hie Farhang-e Rustaie [The Constitution of the Rural Cultural Houses] (Tehran, Iran: The Ministry of Land Reform and Rural Affairs, 1347/1968) p.7.

2/ Komiteh Khaneh-hie Farhang Rustaie [Ahwaz, Iran: Public Relations Office, the Department of Co-operation and Rural Affairs, 1351/1972], p. 14.

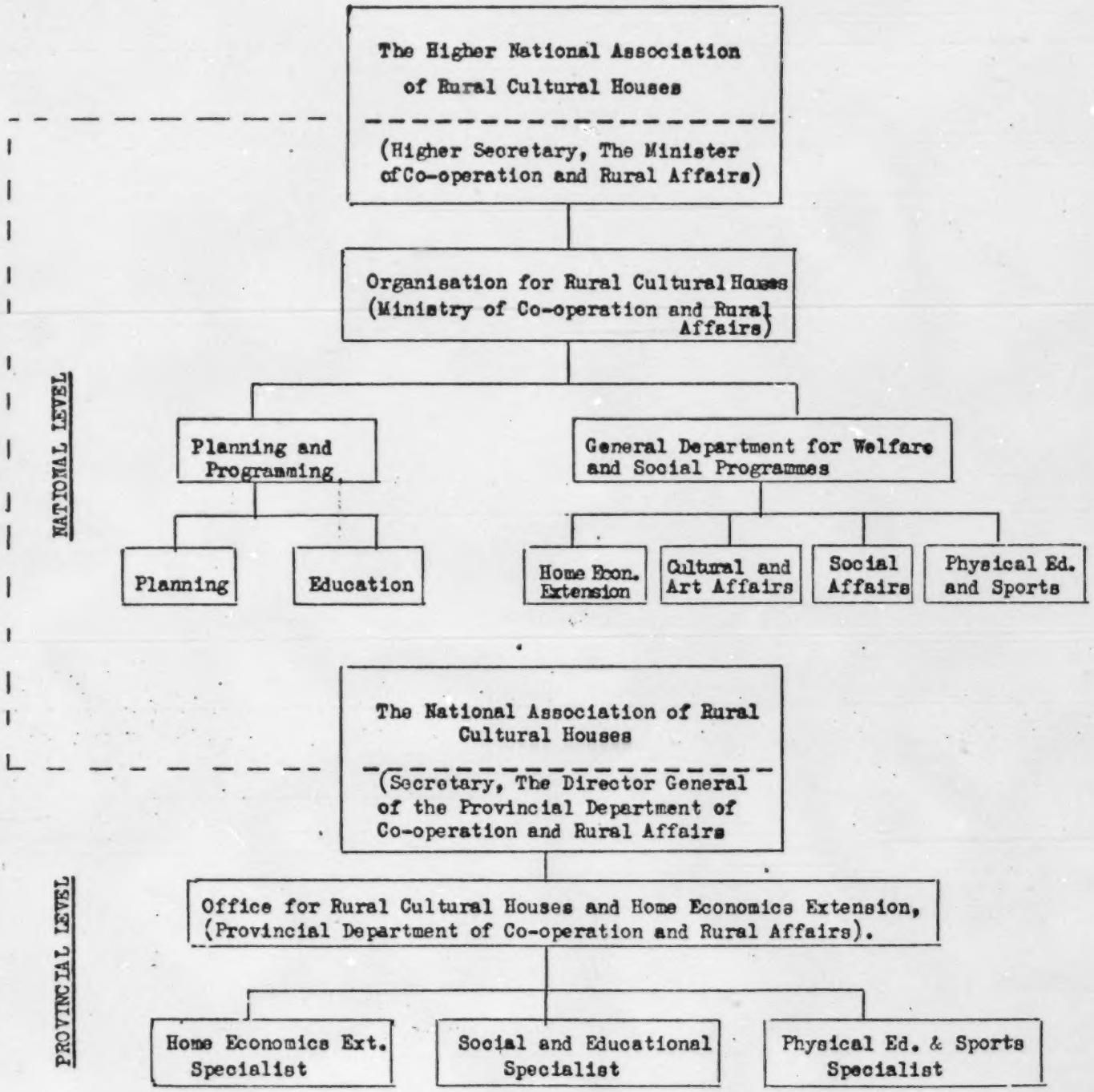

FIGURE 1 :— ORGANISATIONAL CHART FOR RURAL CULTURAL HOUSES AT THE NATIONAL (CENTRAL) AND PROVINCIAL LEVELS a/

Source: a/ Adapted from:
"Asasnameh-e Anjoman-e Khaneh-hie Farhang-e Rustaie", op. cit., pp. 4-8.

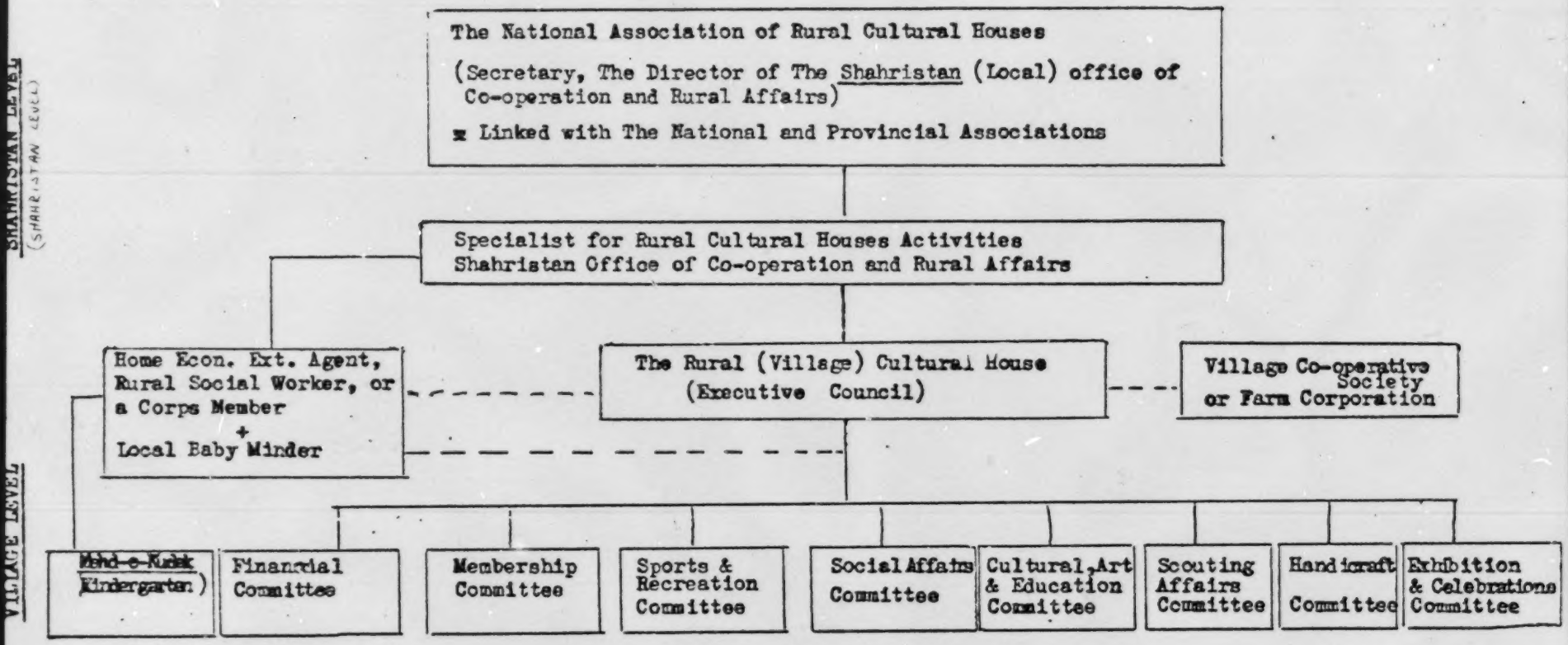

FIGURE 2: .— ORGANIZATIONAL CHART FOR RURAL CULTURAL HOUSES AT SHAHRISTAN (LOCAL) AND VILLAGE LANDS a/

Source: a/ Adapted from:
Aiemnameh-e Ageraie Khaneh-hie Farhang-e Rustaie, op.cit., pp. 4 - 15.

consists of seven people: two village elders, introduced by the village co-operative society, or the local farm corporation; two youths recommended by the village school master or the Literacy Corps member; the manager of the village co-operative society or the manager of the local farm corporation; the school master (teacher) or Literacy Corps member; and, the Extension and Development Corpsman. One village elder is selected as the head of the executive council, and one of the youths as the 'manager' of the cultural house. The Literacy Corps member or the school master acts as the house secretary, and the manager of the co-operative society or manager of the farm corporation functions as the treasurer of the house. The council supervises the work of eight committees. Each committee consists of between 3 to 7 members and is responsible for promoting athletic, cultural and recreational activities among the villagers, young and old alike.1/ Membership of the village cultural house is voluntary and the membership charge is five rials per month. The facilities of the house ordinarily consist of simple sports equipment, a small library containing a few books and magazines, and a meeting room (often equipped with a radio and occasionally with a black and white television). These are usually made available for the use of all villagers under the supervision of one of the members of the executive council or the official agent.

The Ministry of Co-operation and Rural Affairs usually assign an agent to each of the rural cultural houses. The village-level agent, is usually a young woman, known either as moravaj-e khaneh dari, home economics extension agent, or madad kar-e rustaie, rural social worker.2/ The work of

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1/ "Aiennameh-e Agerale Khaneh-hie Farhang-e Rustaie", op. cit., p. 9.

2/ Recently the name has changed to Rustayar, village adviser.

the Ministry agent involves assisting and directing the various activities of the cultural house and (in the case of women agents) carrying out some kind of home economic advisory service for the village women. In this respect her work may include such tasks as teaching handicrafts, sewing, cooking and family planning. In addition to these, in a number of villages, the agent with the assistance of a hired parastor mahali, i.e. baby minder, operates a small mahd-e kudak, a kind of kindergarten, playgroup or nursery school. In some of the rural cultural houses the staff consists of Corpsmen and women, the men being usually members of the Extension and Development Corps and the women members of the Female Social Services Corps.

3. The Scope of the Programme

The growth of the rural cultural houses in Iran from their beginning in 1968 and up to 1977 is shown in Table I. As the data indicate, there has been a rapid increase in the number of cultural houses during the first five years of the programme, but from 1973 to 1977 there has been virtually no change. This rather static situation in recent years, has probably been due to the introduction of the village polarization programme and resettlement scheme which implicitly prevents the extension of services into smaller villages.

In Khuzestan, the number of cultural houses has grown from 13 in March 1970 to 48 in October 1972 and to 69 in November 1973, when they served 1.8 per cent of the total 3,800 villages in the Province.[1] (In May 1978 the total

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1/ Personal Interview with Behruz Meshagin, Public Relations Officer, Co-operation and Rural Affairs Department of Khuzestan, November 12, 1973.

TABLE 1 . — THE GROWTH OF RURAL CULTURAL HOUSES IN IRAN 1968 - 77

Year	Villages With Cultural Houses		Population of Villages	Members of Cultural Houses		Cultural Houses With Kindergarten		No. of Children Attending Kindergarten
	No.	% of Total 55,000		No.	% of Total pop.	No.	% of Village With C.H.	
1968[a]	40	0.1						
196[illegible]	150	0.3						
1970	300	0.5	492,216	38,821	7.9			
1971	700	1.3						
1972[b]	776	1.4	1,598,836	98,618	6.2	449	57.6	13,955
1973[c]	1,000	1.8	2,065,856	156,314	7.7	540	54.0	16,765
1974[d]	1,006	1.8				550	54.7	27,000
1977[e]	1,030	1.9	2,141,559	198,150	9.2	830	80.6	27,065

Sources:

a/ "Gozaresh Eqdamate Anjamyafteh Dar Zamineh Tashgil-e Khaneh haie Farhang-e Rustaie Az Badve Tashkil Leqayat Payan-e Sale-e 1349 / Report on Activities Concerning the Establishment of Rural Cultural Houses Up to 1970/, Submitted by the Ministry of Land Reform and Rural Co-operative, 1970, p.1. (data of 1968 - 71)

b/ Aqaz-e Doran-e Sazandeqi, op. cit., p.47.

c/ Bulletin Vezheh Karkonan-e Vazarat-e Ta'avun va Omur-e Rustaha /Special Bulletin for the Employees of the Ministry of Co-operative and Rural Affairs/, No. 20, Azar 1352 (Dec. 1973).

d/ Kayhan, 24 Shahrivar 1953 (15 September 1974).

e/ Rural Cultural Houses Organisation, Noh Sal Talash dar Khaneh-hai Farhang Rustaie /The Work of Rural Cultural Houses in Nine Years/, Tehran, Iran: The Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, 2536 (1977).

number of Rural Cultural Houses in the Province of Khuzestan was 70 [1]).

During the 1973-74 field work, three of these cultural houses were visited a number of times. (They were situated in the villages of Shams-abad, Amaleh Taymour and Dehbar; all in the vicinity of the town of Dezful, north of the Province of Khuzestan.) The general activities of these cultural houses were more or less in line with the general pattern of activities which have been outlined above. However, in each of these cultural houses, a mahd-e kudak, kindergarten, had been in operation for at least three years and about 30 pre-school childern, 3-6 years old, participated in the programme. The total number of childern attended these three kindergartens probably constituted less than 20 per cent of the total number of childern in the age-group. The majority of the childern attending these centres were selected from larger families with lower incomes.

While at school, each child was given a free breakfast (some canned fruit and five biscuits). In addition, on two or three days a week, they were provided with hot lunches. The kindergarten met both in the morning (8-11.30 a.m.) and in afternoon (2-4.30 p.m.) and the curriculum consists of such activities as playing, simple drwing, singing and story-telling and a brief introduction to the Farsi alphabet. The staff of these kindergartens was supplemented by hiring an elderly woman (i.e. baby minder) from the village whose main job was to assist the official agent in the operation of the centre by looking after the childern.

1/ Information received from the Cultural Houses Office, Agriculture and Rural Development Department of Khuzestan, May 25, 1978.

4. Summary and Conclusion

Prior to the 1950s, the state of physical and social services was very poor in almost all of Iran's some 55,000 villages. The Government-sponsored services at village-level were often limited to the provision of security, through the agency of gendarmerie. In a few major villages the Government might also provide elementary schools. It was not until the early fifties that a number of socio-economic programmes were introduced in rural areas. Among these, the establishment of rural cultural houses was aimed at improving the quality of life and social conditions in the villages. Currently, the extent of this programme in Iran is very limited, but in future, it may prove to be effective instrument in assisting the peasantry in general and rural youth in particular to achieve a socially enriched life through developing peasants' athletic, artistic, and technical potentialities.

In short, the impact of the activities of these few cultural houses on the life of the inhabitants of villages covered by the programme is difficult to assess at this early stage. However, it seems that if the work of these centres could be co-ordinated with the activities of the other village services and organisations, they could contribute towards improving the living conditions of the villagers.